NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE IN AIR WARFARE: THE DIFFERENCE IN THE GULF

CORE COURSE 2 ESSAY

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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
1996		**00-00-1996 to 00-00-1996**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Political Interference in Air Warfare: The Difference in the Gulf	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**11**	

INTRODUCTION

Many air power advocates view the forty-three days of Desert Storm as the zenith of military aviation history Citing the predictions of theorists from Douhet and Trenchard to Mitchell and LeMay, they see the events of 1991 as a watershed, where aviation technology finally caught up with seventy years of theory to produce unqualified success This aerial success, they would suggest, might even have made a ground campaign unnecessary, given enough time and ordnance In their zeal to advance the cause of aviation, they have focused on the internal factors that contributed to the unmitigated success Notably, they have documented the planning factors, organization, target and weapons selections, and systematic execution of the air war in hopes of capturing the key elements that led to success

With the lessons of the desert captured for successive generations, we will, presumably, be able to duplicate the outcome with equal or improved results "Lessons learned" provide a wide variety of suggested improvements in areas from "friendly fire" doctrine to ballistic missile defense Appropriate kudos have been registered in favor of "stealth" technology, precision guided munitions, night operations, unmanned aerial vehicles, and fully integrated, multi-service, multi-national coalition air warfare, all coordinated under a single command and control structure producing a single daily Air Tasking Order (ATO) Yet all of these introspections have missed one crucial aspect of the execution of the Gulf War the freedom of action that was given to the military commanders by their civilian superiors

The critical relationship between civilian leaders and generals on the battlefield was first addressed in the theories of Sun Tzu and von Moltke Their teachings give insight to why air commanders were continually frustrated in Korea and Vietnam by increasing restrictions from political leaders In stark contrast, the Gulf War was characterized by only very general "top down" guidance from the President and his cabinet, leaving the theater CINC and his component commanders much greater freedom One enduring lesson from the Persian Gulf is that air operations can enjoy unqualified success in the absence of specific political restrictions imposed by civilian leadership

THEORISTS ON POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

The frustrations of operational commanders with interference from their civilian superiors can be traced at least as far back as 500 B C The great Chinese general and theorist Sun Tzu expressed his sentiments in The Art of War In his chapter on Offensive Strategy, Sun Tzu lists three ways a ruler can bring misfortune upon his army The first is directly ordering the commander to advance or retreat when ignorant of the battlefield conditions The interpreter Chia Lin further elaborates that "no evil is greater than commands of the sovereign from the court" (Griffith 81) This passage suggests that there is no substitute for the direct judgment of the on-scene commander The second cardinal sin is "When ignorant of military affairs, to participate in their administration"(Griffith 81) Again, with incomplete knowledge of the battlefield, civilian leadership, often geographically separated, is at best disruptive to the conduct of operations and at worst can cause disastrous results

A century before American involvement in Southeast Asia, political interference was a major problem for the Prussian general and theorist, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder Moltke went well beyond Clausewitz in his descriptions of the appropriate interactions between the state and the commander He once had been denied permission to shell Paris by Chancellor Bismarck (Rothenberg 297) Shortly after this confrontation Moltke produced one of his most significant writings, "On Strategy," where argued that "once the army had been committed to war, the direction of the military effort should be defined by the soldiers alone 'Political considerations,' he wrote, 'can be taken into account only as long as they do not make demands that are militarily improper or impossible'" (Rothenberg 298) Both Sun Tzu and Moltke seem to agree that, while the sovereign has complete latitude in the area of policy making, his intervention at the operational level is detrimental The reaction of generals to the imposition of political restrictions is entirely consistent with history

TRENDS IN POLITICAL INTERFERENCE

Korea marked the beginning of a significant change in the US civilian and military spheres of responsibility for the conduct of war (Hosmer 56) In aerial warfare, action was marked by significant political constraints From the beginning of air operations, President Truman limited or restricted the maneuvering airspace of the Far East Air Force (FEAF) by issuing directives through his key civilian

decision makers These "standing orders" were transmitted through the Supreme U N Commander, General MacArthur, and directed all air and naval forces to remain "well clear" of the Soviet and Manchurian borders (Hosmer 20) In July 1950, the President refused to approve high-altitude reconnaissance over any part of the Soviet Far East These moves were believed necessary to prevent the involvement of either China or Russia in the conflict, with the potential for escalation to a nuclear confrontation (Truman 346) However, the limitations failed to prevent the entry of the Chinese into the war in November In fact, had reconnaissance missions been approved, the US might have predicted the entry of the communists, conceivably saving thousands of American and Allied lives

After China entered the war, the Truman administration continued the policy preventing air forces from crossing the Yalu River into Manchuria Prohibitions were expanded to include any targets anywhere near the borders of China or Russia For example, the port of Rashin, seventeen miles south of the Soviet border was excluded from attack even though the military commanders were convinced it was a critical resupply center (Hosmer 44) MiG fighter bases in Manchuria were also disallowed even though the communists were launching up to 200 missions a day to attack US bombers (Momeyer 141)

General MacArthur expressed his frustration to the President "The present restrictions on my area of operations provide a complete sanctuary for hostile air The effect of this abnormal condition upon the morale and combat efficiency of both air and ground troops is major this factor can assume decisive proportions" (Truman 377) The President again denied all requests to lift the constraints, because he and Secretary of State Acheson were convinced that the Russians were just waiting for an opportunity to enter the war (Truman 387-388) In a very real sense, Sun Tzu's evils were being realized, commands were being given by the sovereign from the court, a trend that would continue into the next major American combat operations

Commanders in Vietnam were subject to many of the same political restrictions and operational constraints as their predecessors in Korea, sparked by many of the same concerns on the part of the politicians "Well clear" of China was quantified by a buffer zone (BZ) 30 miles deep on the western border and 25 miles deep in the east, where it ran into the Gulf of Tonkin (Parks 9) The BZ contained many of the most valuable interdiction targets Prohibited flying areas were established around key population centers because President Johnson was so concerned about limiting civilian casualties

(Hosmer 69) Restricted areas around Hanoi and Haiphong measured 30 and 10 miles respectively Key Vietnamese airfields were surrounded by 10 mile "no fly" zones By limiting the airspace in these unprecedented ways, "the White House established a series of political, military, and geographic sanctuaries throughout North Vietnam in which attacks of otherwise legitimate targets were prohibited" (Parks 9)

In targeting, the limitations of the Johnson administration were even more pronounced than those of Truman The entire command and control process for the conduct of the air war was turned upside down In Korea, targeting was done by the air component commander who usually advised the JCS and received feedback from Washington only if there were objections at the political level (Momeyer 56) By contrast, in Vietnam the JCS were involved in every step of the targeting process, acting as an intermediary between the executive branch and the operational commander The President personally approved each target for the following week at his, now famous, Tuesday luncheons The target list could only reach the President after it had been reviewed and modified by civilians at numerous levels of the DOD and the State Department (Parks 13) This is one reason operation "Rolling Thunder" lasted 43 months when it had been designed for 12 weeks Throughout the campaign, military commanders complained of unwarranted restrictions by civilian leaders with regard to targets, number and frequency of strikes, size of striking force, routes of ingress and egress, weapons authorized, and restrike authority (Parks 2-14)

A third element of political interference in Vietnam was the timing and pace of air operations The most obvious examples of these negative influences were the numerous bombing halts throughout the war Commanders were outraged by these interruptions because fundamental air doctrine teaches that air power can only be decisive when its application is intense, continuous, and focused on the enemy's vital systems (Momeyer 339) The Johnson administration ordered 16 bombing pauses or cutbacks between 1965 and 1968 Each respite seriously diminished the effectiveness of the Rolling Thunder campaign by allowing repair and replacement of enemy damage (Hosmer 95) In addition, the Vietnamese took full advantage of bombing halts and known restricted flying zones to build the world's most formidable air defense network consisting of more than 60 surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites and over 2000 anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) pieces by the end of 1966 Most of these AAA and SAM sites were

in the Haiphong-Hanoi sanctuary areas and thus could not be attacked (Parks 74) American aviators would not face a more powerful air defense system until 25 years later over downtown Bagdad

DIFFERENCES IS THE GULF WAR

The Guidance

The trend toward more restrictive political guidance interfering with the operational execution of air warfare was reversed in the 1991 Gulf War The Bush administration had grown up with the stinging lessons of Vietnam The President took the leadership position from the beginning of the crisis by setting only generalized "top down" guidance, and letting the military experts develop specific plans The Iraqis invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990 Two days later Lieutenant General Chuck Horner, the Air Force Component Commander to CENTCOM, accompanied General Schwarzkopf and General Powell to Camp David, Maryland Together the military leaders met with the seven civilian members of the President's inner circle, which, including Powell was called the "Gang of Eight "

General Horner briefed his concept for the air defense of Saudi Arabia (Schwarzkopf 299-301) After the cabinet had asked questions and discussed several issues, the President asked some questions centered on two issues First was his deep concern over loss of lives on both sides of the confrontation, and second was a genuine interest in the opinions of US allies in NATO and the Middle East General Horner came away from the meeting with what he called "implicit political guidance that every operation we planned on the air side took into account--what was the impact on loss of life from the enemy as well as the friendly forces" (Horner 19) That was the extent of the initial guidance to the military Horner later reflected "I found the political leadership much to my liking as a commander in the field " This stood in stark contrast to his experience in Vietnam "where we had a very difficult time with our political leadership" (Horner 19)

Here it is important to note that a special relationship existed between the senior military and political leadership This was a most fortunate situation that did not exist between the Truman or the Johnson administrations at the time of Korea or Vietnam General Colin Powell had served as National Security Advisor to President Reagan when George Bush was the Vice President A special working relationship and trust had been established when the two men were working a variety of crises from the

armed intervention in Grenada to the Iran-Contra scandal General Powell had also worked closely, according to his biography, with Secretary of Defense Cheney when the latter was a prominent member of Congress Cheney had served as White House Chief of Staff under President Ford before being elected to four terms in Congress, eventually becoming the minority whip It was the new Secretary of Defense, Cheney, who had nominated Powell to become the twelfth Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (Powell 327, 405) The collegial association and close familiarity of the civilian leadership with Chairman Powell may have engendered a unique trust that did not require the same level of guidance and restrictions that had been issued to military commanders in previous conflicts In addition, President Bush's own service as a Navy fighter pilot probably had an impact on his opinions about specific political guidance to the field

The Plan

In the absence of any specific restrictions or constraints, CENTCOM planners and members of the Air Staff "Checkmate" team continued to develop an offensive air strategy under the leadership of Colonel John Warden, a Vietnam veteran and leading Air Force intellectual, who had published a book in 1988 entitled The Air Campaign Planning for Combat Colonel Warden's plan was based on five concentric rings of targets that identified the enemy's strategic "centers of gravity " The inner ring, considered the initial key to success, was the Iraqi leadership and its various headquarters The next ring was critical production facilities including electricity and oil Third was infrastructure to support the military including key roads, railroads, and lines of communication The fourth ring was population, which because of the implicit guidance on minimizing casualties, was targeted with psychological operations The fifth and final target group was fielded forces which included ballistic missile sites, long-range aircraft, weapons of mass destruction, and (later) the elite troops of the Republican Guards Army Initially the list included 84 primary targets and the name of the plan was "Instant Thunder", a deliberate attempt to contrast the intensity of the concept with Vietnam's Rolling Thunder The CJCS reviewed the concept with the Secretary of Defense and received his approval without additional restrictions (OSD 92) Over time, the Instant Thunder plan became the basis of General Schwarzkopf's four phase campaign plan

which included 1 Instant Thunder, 2 Suppression of air defenses over Kuwait, 3 Attrition of enemy forces by fifty percent, and 4 Direct ground attack (Schwarzkopf 320)

The Constraints

It would be misleading to suggest that there were no constraints to the planning and execution of the air war In reality, there were many restrictions, but they were imposed by the military planners on themselves following the general guidance given by the President and the advice of military legal counsel In order to minimize collateral damage and overall casualties, only precision guided munitions (PGMs) were used to destroy key targets in Bagdad, and the majority of strikes were accomplished at night (There were also tactical reasons for this timing) Off limits targets included mosques, religious shrines, archaeological sites, civilian facilities, the civilian population, and other politically sensitive installations, all of which were coordinated with national intelligence agencies and the State Department (OSD 100)

The Results

The results of the Gulf War air operations are widely known and well documented In 39 days of preparatory strikes and the one hundred hour blitzkrieg of combined operations, all of the President's original objectives were achieved An uninterrupted sequence of carefully planned air operations, devoid of political restrictions and Washington meddling, "dominated the military outcome of Operation Desert Storm" (Keaney 381) With less than one percent of the ordnance dropped in Vietnam in seven years, joint forces air power incapacitated the Iraqi command structure, slashed military production, grounded or destroyed the Iraqi Air Force, and significantly reduced the combat capability of the Army (OSD 179) In addition, the thousands of surrendering prisoners proved the value of both the sustained air assault and the psychological operations, rounding out the five centers of gravity identified in Colonel Warden's conceptual air plan President Bush expressed his perspective on the results in May 1991 "Gulf lesson one is the value of air power (it) was right on target from day one The Gulf war taught us that we must retain combat superiority in the skies Our air strikes were the most effective, yet humane, in the history of warfare" (OSD 89)

In the aftermath of the Gulf, there are still skeptics who claim that air power faced an unworthy adversary However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Iraqi Air Force, either by its equipment, experience, or training standards was any less capable at the onset of Desert Storm than the North Korean/Chinese or the North Vietnamese Air Forces The current Air Force Chief of Staff, General Fogleman, addresses critics with the following statement

> After Desert Storm, there were a lot of 'experts' who came out and said that you can't look at what happened in the desert as a window into the future because the Iraqis acted so irrationally Well, why do you think they acted so irrationally? They were subjected to 39 days of airpower, in which we owned their airspace **This tends to make people act irrationally!** (DAF 24)

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

In summary, while the military lessons of the Gulf War will continue to be studied for many years, it is appropriate to also examine the unique political framework in which the war was fought In contrast to the experiences of Korea and Vietnam, air commanders in Desert Storm were not subjected to the same constraints and restrictions with respect to maneuvering airspace, target selections, or timing of operations This undoubtedly contributed to the great success of air power The reasons for the reduction in the amount of civilian interference at the operational level are less clear The relationship between the politicians and the generals does tend to follow the guidelines of the theorists Sun Tzu and Moltke more closely than at earlier times

Three conclusions may help explain the reduced political interference First was the nearly unanimous support of other world powers Traditional rivalries with the communist powers did not produce a polar alignment where an escalation to all-out nuclear war was likely In fact, the UN Security Council voted 14-0 to condemn the invasion of Kuwait including the vote of the Russians (Powell 463) One benefit to the end of the Cold War may be more freedom of action in "limited" wars with the elimination of direct "Superpower" confrontations A related benefit to military commanders would then include less political interference at the operational level

A second reason for reduced civilian guidance in the Gulf was an early meeting between the military commanders and the key political figures during the formative stages of planning This produced a direct relationship between the President, his Cabinet, and the ground and air force commanders Critical initial guidance was delivered first hand and the military commanders could sense implications of the senior decision makers and translate this into their own direction without the need for specific limitations and restrictions From that point forward, the military imposed its own discipline on planning and execution, removing the requirement for external controls

Finally, the close personal and professional working relationship between the CJCS and the "Gang of Eight" cannot be over emphasized Not only was there inherent trust in General Powell, but because of his personal experience as the National Security Advisor, many of the subtle political and international issues which might have generated restrictions were already foremost in his thoughts and actions When civilian leadership has full faith and confidence in their appointed military commanders, the likelihood of severe restrictions and micro-management is substantially reduced

While the unique circumstances of the Gulf War are not likely to be duplicated in any future confrontation, an appreciation of the major factors influencing the unprecedented cooperation between military commanders and key civilian leaders may lead to even greater victories

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